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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on empirical research carried out during a two-year period in which the British government introduced a new framework for the reorganization of schools. The research assessed the views of the governors and managers of grant-maintained (GM) schools with regard to their interpretations about the future governance of their schools. The article traces the move to self-governance in the 1980s and the creation of the GM schools. GM status gave schools the opportunity to govern and manage themselves; they differed from other publicly-funded schools in that they were incorporated institutions directly funded by central government and had no legal relationships with a local education authority. The paper reviews the research on the GM schools and details the research carried out for this report. The data for the study were generated through a pilot phase and a main survey. The findings indicate some reluctance on the part of GM headteachers and chairs of governors to accept the changes in the structure and powers of the governing bodies of their schools. These leaders reported that, under the arrangements for GM schools, they had more freedom and flexibility to recruit governors who brought specific skills and expertise to the job. (Contains 27 references.) (RJM)

**FAREWELL TO GRANT MAINTAINED STATUS: THE FUTURE OF SELF
GOVERNING SCHOOLS**

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FAREWELL TO GRANT MAINTAINED STATUS: THE FUTURE OF SELF GOVERNING SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Driven by concern about the ability of their workforce to be internationally competitive (Levacic, 1995), many governments, particularly those of English-speaking countries, have focused on improving educational standards and accountability (Dimmock, 1993) in recent years. Often this has been achieved by dismantling centralised bureaucracies and creating autonomous educational institutions with various forms of school-based management (Whitty *et al*, 1998).

This trend was especially exemplified in Britain. In 1988 the Conservative Government made autonomy a key feature of its reforms of English and Welsh schools through the introduction of local management of schools (LMS) and, in particular, the creation of grant maintained (GM) schools. The latter were characterised by their independence from local bureaucracy, that is, from the local education authority (LEA) and, correspondingly, by a particular form of self-governance.

Although the increase in autonomy in the form of LMS has been generally accepted and valued by all schools and their LEAs, the GM policy has always been contentious. While GM managers and governors have exhorted the benefits of self-governance, other practitioners and educationalists have been more concerned about unfair funding and the lack of coherence in planning school places in areas which included GM schools (Rogers, 1992; DfEE, 1997). It was, therefore, not surprising that, in opposition, New Labour pledged to abolish GM schools and, soon after coming to power in May 1997, published a White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997) which outlined a new framework for the organisation of schools. Three new categories of schools were introduced: foundation, voluntary and community schools. Although some diversity was to be maintained across the different types, a major implication for GM schools was the requirement in the White Paper that there would be LEA representation on the governing body of all maintained schools regardless of classification. Fifteen months later, in July 1998, legislation, in the form of the Schools Standards and Framework Act, confirmed the new arrangement. Hence, those schools that were GM have lost their most valued feature, the 'opted out' version of self-governance (Bush *et al*, 1993 p.69, Fitz *et al* 1993 p.66).

This paper reports on empirical research carried out during the two year period in which the legislation introducing the new framework for the organisation of schools was developed in preparation for its implementation in September 1999. It was a time of great uncertainty for the governors and managers of GM schools. The research is concerned with these people's views and interpretations about the future governance of their schools as the opportunity for state schools to opt out comes to an end. Thus, it is intended that the work will contribute to the body of knowledge about the GM version of self-governance and inform the development of autonomous schools in the future. The paper begins by outlining the moves towards self-governance in England and Wales.

THE MOVE TO SELF-GOVERNANCE

In the early 1980s, the formal responsibilities of school governors in England and Wales were relatively ill-defined with the exception that the 1944 Education Act required them to have oversight of the curriculum and the general organisation of the school (Deem *et al*, 1995). Additionally, prior to the 1980s, many governing bodies were dominated by party political governors (Deem and Brehony, 1994). However, the election of a Conservative government in 1979 saw the start of a wide-ranging strategy of change in education, including the reform of the governance of schools.

The 1980 Education Act made parental representation on school governing bodies a legal requirement and, in 1986, the Education (No 2) Act increased the number of parents and co-opted governors, including some from industry. This, in turn, decreased the number of LEA representatives on individual school governing bodies. The responsibilities of governing bodies were also increased, first by the 1986 Act, and then again for schools with delegated powers, by the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). Additionally, this Act gave governors the right to pursue the route to GM status with its associated powers and responsibilities.

Further reform to the governance of state schools followed in 1989, 1991 and 1993. The last of these Acts was intended to enhance the GM sector particularly and bring about its rapid expansion by requiring the governing bodies of all maintained schools to consider 'opting out' as an option for their school annually. Moreover, this Act simplified the process of going GM, offered incorporation to reduce legal liability and introduced new arrangements for funding and organising schools within this sector.

In sum, as Deem *et al* (1995) observe, the changes to school governance in England and Wales during the Conservative Government's period of office were mostly concerned with:

changing or redrawing the boundaries of those eligible to become governors, with a bias towards parents, business people and community members, and with giving governing bodies increased surveillance powers over headteachers as well as giving them shared responsibilities for delegated budgets and staffing” (p.14).

GRANT MAINTAINED SCHOOL

GM status gave schools the opportunity to govern and manage themselves (Bush *et al*, 1993). These schools differed from other publicly funded ones in that they were incorporated institutions directly funded by central government and had no legal relationship with an LEA. (LEAs were still required to provide a limited number of services to individual pupils in GM schools). The GM sector was created from existing schools as a result of some of them ‘opting out’ of their LEA after a parental ballot and approval from the Secretary of State.

The composition of the governing body of a GM school also differed from other maintained schools in that there was no representation from the LEA. The majority of members were described as ‘first’ or, in the case of schools that were formerly voluntary aided or controlled, ‘foundation’ governors. The significance of this difference is that LEA representatives, nominated by a democratically elected body, have public accountability, whilst the accountability to “the community served by the (GM) school” (DES, 1991) is not defined (Bush *et al*, 1993; Feintuck, 1994).

Without the back-up of the local authority, the governing bodies of GM schools had more responsibilities than their LEA counterparts, for example, as employers, as corporate owners, as arbiters and having final responsibility for the curriculum, assessment and reporting (Bush *et al*, 1993 p.179). Although Halpin *et al* (1991) argue that the nature of these differences was minimal, these freedoms provided by GM status were often quoted as among their main advantages by the policy’s advocates and supporters (Davies and Anderson, 1992).

RESEARCHING GM SCHOOLS

Although their life span was comparatively short, GM schools have been the subject of a significant number of research studies over the past decade (see Bell *et al*, 1996; Bush *et al*, 1993; Cauldwell and Reid, 1996; Fitz *et al*, 1993; Levacic and Hardman, 1999; Tritter and Chadwick, 1997). Notwithstanding the fact that these enquiries adopt different methodologies, their research designs focus largely on the views and perceptions of the key actors in the opting out process, most notably headteachers and, to a lesser extent,

chairs of governors. Some of these investigations include findings based upon empirical data elicited from other informants. For example, Fitz *et al* also interviewed pupils and parents, while Bush *et al* surveyed and interviewed teacher and parent governors. Other studies (Bush *et al*, 1993; Neill *et al*, 1994; Thompson, 1992) included teacher union representatives in their samples of informants. However, it is the headteachers and chairs of governors who have usually been identified by researchers as the key commentators on the policy generally and on its consequences in particular for their schools.

The research on which this paper is based adopts a similar approach. It highlights the role of the headteacher and chair of governors in the GM movement in that it reports on the views and perceptions of these two groups. The data reported here were generated through two methods: a pilot phase and a main survey. First, as part of a pilot study, twelve semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with the headteachers and chairs of governors of six GM schools. Second, the same two categories of people from another 126 GM schools were each asked to complete and return a questionnaire. The interviews were held in September and October 1997. The questionnaire was distributed one year later in September 1998 with a final closing date for completed scripts in late October 1998.

The six schools involved in the interview (pilot) stage were, with one exception, selected from those that had been incorporated in 1992. As a group they were chosen to represent the range of characteristics of GM schools, for example, selective, single sex, religious foundation as well as from both the primary and secondary divide. The one school not actually incorporated in 1992 was included in order to satisfy the small school criterion; it had opted out in 1993.

The questionnaire sample consisted of all schools incorporated in 1991 (58 in total), together with a further 68 schools which had gained GM status in 1993. The latter were again selected to represent the primary/secondary divide and each sub-part of the 1993 sample was selected at random from all schools in that phase which had opted out in that year.

The outcomes from the interviews were used to inform the preparation of the questionnaire. It was piloted with the 12 interviewees and minor adjustments made prior to distribution. The questionnaire survey achieved a 48 per cent response rate overall (N=121). A breakdown of responses is provided in Table I.

[insert Table I here]

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Changes in the composition of governing bodies

Respondents had much to say about the changes in the composition of governing bodies and the likely effect on their school. In the main, the changes can be classified under the broad headings of 'LEA representation', 'parent governors' and 'recruitment and selection' - areas which were also identified as the main areas of concern in the interviews. Additionally, other issues were raised such as changes in the size of the governing body and perceived 'quality' of governors. For example, one respondent wrote that s/he was concerned about "having to lose committed, knowledgeable and hard working governors who bring their expertise at no charge..."

A minority indicated that they had no significant concerns about the changes in composition of governing bodies. Typically, a chair of governors stated: "Any new composition will not affect the management and processes of the governing body". Others took the opportunity to mention issues connected with the future of their schools, albeit that they were unrelated to the composition of the governing body. For example, 12 per cent (N=14) mentioned funding and other aspects of the financial arrangements within the new framework and one headteacher expressed concern about admissions here. Another head and a chair of governors, not from the same school, indicated that their worries about the change in composition of the governing body included issues relating to selective status. Finally, a different headteacher identified achievement and the state of the buildings - presumably she was concerned that both of these would decline under future arrangements.

The broad headings mentioned above are now used to report the relevant findings from both the pilot interviews and main questionnaire survey.

LEA representation

Only 20 per cent of questionnaire respondents (headteachers N=14 and chairs of governors N=10) welcomed the requirement of LEA representation on their governing bodies and 31 per cent (N=38) mentioned it as an issue of concern in respect of the changes in governing body representation. Many of this latter group commented in general terms, writing expressions like "LEA representation" as the area of concern to the school.

However, when asked directly if they welcome the LEA appointments, both the headteachers and the chairs of governors were much more explicit. Informants, both questionnaire respondents and interviewees, demonstrated a range of responses here.

Only a few adopted a positive approach. For example, one headteacher wrote: "We wish to work collaboratively with the LEA" and a chair of governors considered LEA governors offered an opportunity "to promote the school within our LEA that does not want GM schools. (They) will assist in promoting the expansion of the school".

One group of respondents took a neutral stance, accepting the inevitability of the change. Chairs of governors commented: "We neither welcome nor object to this requirement" (questionnaire respondent) and "we don't want them but we will have them" (interviewee). Some headteachers took a similar line: "I am ambivalent about this" and "we are indifferent" (questionnaire respondents). However, although accepting the situation, the concerns of a number of respondents are summarised by one headteacher who wrote: "It depends on who they are and their attitude to the school". While another headteacher summed up the situation: "if (the LEA governors are) local people genuinely interested in the school I could support the notion - otherwise (it is) a piece of political correctness".

It seems that previous experience of working with LEA representatives as part of their governing body had negatively influenced some respondents; 18 per cent (of the questionnaire respondents N=22) specifically mentioned it. For example, headteachers wrote: "our experience of LEA governors was that their interest was superficial and their attendance was poor" and "in the past they were not helpful. They do not understand the school". Chairs of governors commented in a similar vein: "historical experience is that LEA governors collect governorships for personal, political enhancement rather than commitment to a particular school" and "previous experience of LEA governors has demonstrated that they play little or no part".

For some informants, perceptions about LEA governors were that they would have a political agenda. A headteacher interviewee commented: "They came infrequently. They weren't interested in the school. But when they came they were full of resolutions. National issues were rehearsed while this school was ignored". Questionnaire respondents expressed similar fears: "It is difficult to determine their purpose other than to act as 'informants' between LEA and school, school and LEA" (headteacher) and "The governing body under GM status has been strictly non political" (chair of governors).

However, another headteacher interviewee acknowledged the importance of not assuming LEA governors would revert automatically to their former practice. He remarked: "There is a danger I will assume that the former LEA governors of this school will be typical of LEA governors that are yet to be appointed. I may be doing them a disservice because LEAs have changed and, hopefully, so have their representatives". Although, in contrast, in another headteacher interviewee's school rumours were rife that the LEA intended to make sure its governor representatives are people who are "vocal, anti and pushy".

Other informants just stated their direct opposition to this change. One chair of governors wrote: "We do not consider this to be a positive step". After stating that it is "quite unnecessary", another added, "but unlikely to affect our operation". A number of headteachers were equally forthright. For example, one wrote: "The governing body has become very skilled and knowledgeable in educational matters and has very successfully run a large school - (the governors) probably know more than many LEA members and officers!" A different headteacher made a connection with school improvement commenting that there is "no evidence that LEAs can contribute to school improvement".

Parent governors

Issues about parent governors also featured among the main concerns about the change in composition of GM governing bodies. One of these was the proportion of parent governors on governing bodies. Government policy, as outlined in the White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997) and subsequently, is premised on the principle of increased parental representation on the governing bodies of all maintained schools. For some informants this increase was a concern in one or more of three ways: parent governor recruitment, the level of objectivity they are able to demonstrate and their continuity. The first of these, parent governor recruitment, is considered in a later section under the broader heading of governor recruitment and selection in general.

In relation to role objectivity, some interviewees commented that parent governors tend to approach governing body matters from their own child's viewpoint. One headteacher interviewee described this as "blinkered" and commented that the number of parent governors (at the time, proposed) within the new framework could be "detrimental to the school". However, she did acknowledge that there is a tension because she added "it is good to have some governors who are seeing it from the children's point of view, but not the majority". One chair of governors interviewed also felt that "you can have too much parental influence". Like others, he was concerned that they could make "unreasonable demands" in relation to their own child. He added that they "tend to relate everything to their child rather than considering the broader educational issues".

This concern about the objectivity of parent governors was followed up in the questionnaire survey; interestingly, quite different results were obtained. Respondents were asked to select one of the following statements as their preferred descriptor of the nature of the contribution from parent governors:

- primarily focused on issues affecting their child
- primarily focused on general school issues

The responses are shown in Table II

[insert Table II here]

The missing responses are accounted for by those of two chairs of governors and two headteachers who each wrote “both” alongside the options offered. In addition, one headteacher indicated that the response of parent governors is “variable”. Finally, another headteacher just added a question mark alongside this question.

The third issue concerning parent governors is that of continuity. As some interviewees pointed out, the period of office served by a parental governor relates to his/her child’s time in the school and is, therefore, limited. Generally, parent governors do not want to continue beyond this time. Linking this with the changes, there was concern that the increased number of parent governors could make changes in committee membership more acute and detrimental to the effectiveness of governing bodies.

In contrast to the issues about increased parental representation on governing bodies, a few questionnaire respondents were concerned about “fewer parent governors”. Some details were given. One explained that under the new framework their “elected (parental governors) increases from 5 to 6 but (they) no longer (have) 2 parent first governors” on their governing body. Thus, it seems that anomalies are already evident in the new system.

Before closing this section on parent governors, it is important to highlight that it could be argued that these issues, and those that follow in the section on recruitment and selection, apply to all governing bodies and not just those associated with GM/foundation schools. However, the fact that the starting points for the changes in governing body composition differ among the various (former) categories of schools provides a counter-argument and, therefore, the issues are relevant and of interest in the specific context of GM schools.

Changes in the powers of governing bodies

The reason most frequently given by GM school headteachers and chairs of governors for seeking opted out status is to gain autonomy and it is, therefore, likely to be the characteristic most valued by these governors and managers. However, they made few comments about the changes in the power of governing bodies during the interviews although this reaction may be explained by a lack of knowledge about, or acknowledgement of, the changes in their powers resulting from the introduction of the new framework at that time. One headteacher demonstrated some understanding by his comment that: “We don’t want to go back to situations when governing bodies had big mouths and no teeth”. It seemed that he equated the introduction of the new framework with ‘going back’ to pre-local management of schools days.

Questionnaire respondents were asked directly whether they welcomed the changes in the powers of their governing body. Not surprisingly, the vast majority expressed little enthusiasm although some did welcome the changes. The results are given in Table III.

[insert Table III here]

In the elaboration of their answers, the respondents indicated a range of views although the majority took the stance expressed by one chair of governors “if it ain’t broke, why mend it?” Some respondents mentioned the reduction in autonomy here. For example, one headteacher wrote that “autonomy and independence have been welcomed. Any loss of these is a retrograde step”, and another made the connection with self-governance explicit when he commented: “The reduction in powers relative to LEAs can only be a weakening of self-governance”.

A subgroup of respondents, mainly consisting of headteachers, linked the changes in power to funding and associated issues. For example, contrary to Government intention, one head wrote “there are strong signals that the LEA will retain much funding at the centre and wish to ‘run’ the schools”. For others, capital funding was an issue. One headteacher commented: “capital funding should be maintained. FAS ensured inset, premises, capital etc spent under those headings and audited it. (We are) unlikely to have the same rigour under the LEA!”

In contrast, however, it was also clear that some respondents did not perceive any real changes in the powers of governing bodies. In the view of one headteacher, “apart from LEA representation, not a great deal will change.” Although not necessarily agreeing with this head, one chair of governors appreciated that the changes could have been greater. “Given the change of political approach, I am reassured by the range of powers left to foundation schools”, he commented.

Among those taking a more positive approach to the changes, there was acknowledgement of broader community issues as exemplified by one headteacher who commented: “We do realise that an agreed admission policy across ‘an area’ is necessary”. Another added: “GM independence has been exhilarating but perhaps LEA governors will play a critical friend role vis a vis the needs of the whole community?”

Governor recruitment and selection

Respondents expressed concern about selection of the LEA representatives and the recruitment of parent governors. Focusing first on the former, a number of headteacher questionnaire respondents raised the issue in their comments. For example, statements such as “criteria to be used by LEA for LEA appointments (is a concern)” and “LEA have

not yet provided criteria on which appointments of LEA governors will be made” were included. One headteacher indicated that “the school is working closely with LEA in this regard”. Moreover, a few schools were attempting to retain present governors as LEA representatives. Another headteacher explained that “the LEA (is) happy for school to nominate two representatives. Therefore, (it is) possible - if we wish - for all governors to remain”. Similarly, a chair of governors expressed the hope that “one or two of our present governors with political connections can fill these positions”.

Turning to recruitment of parents, both interviewees and questionnaire respondents mentioned it. The former asked the obvious question: “Where are they all going to come from? (In fact, this question was also asked about LEA governors by another interviewee.) Questionnaire respondents indicated concern about “attracting additional parent governors” and the “increased difficulty in finding more parent governors”. However, there was also doubt about the principle. Although one chair of governors described parental involvement as “laudable”, he pointed out that “it is very difficult to actually enforce...schools in more disadvantaged areas will get less parental involvement”.

One headteacher interviewee raised concern about retaining existing governors after the introduction of the new framework. Hence, questionnaire respondents were invited to indicate whether any of their governors had expressed an intention to resign and, if so, why. In fact, only one or two had done so; their reasons included “loss of control, fear of LEA intervention and bureaucracy” and “changes are not conducive with interpretation of a governing body”.

LOOSE COUPLING

The data considered here indicate some reluctance on the part of GM headteachers and chairs of governors to accept the changes in the structure and powers of the governing bodies of their schools; they are particularly concerned about LEA governors. They see this requirement as a reduction in autonomy and, consequently, the opportunity for them to achieve the ‘best’ for their school. They perceive that, under the arrangements for GM schools, they had more freedom and flexibility to recruit governors who brought specific skills and expertise and were, therefore, more useful. While there is a question about recruiting sufficient parent governors, the suggestion that there will be a tendency for this group to adopt an ‘own child’ approach appear to be unfounded. In terms of changes in responsibilities, although there was reference to issues of planning, there was more concern about changes in funding. All comments that relate to funding focus on what are perceived to be less favourable arrangements for GM schools. Evidently, these GM headteachers and chairs of governors adopt an ‘own school’ value position.

Bush *et al* (1993, p.209) describe the fundamental question of whether the dominant values in the education system should be those of the local authorities or those of individual schools as underpinning the debate about the strengths and weaknesses of the GM policy. Whether or not this is a true dichotomy is debatable because, inevitably, there are cases where the LEA and school views articulate. However, on this 'bi-polar' assumption, Bush *et al* argue that by recognising the schools as 'prime institutions' (Kogan 1975), the GM policy acknowledged "social realities. The loyalties of all concerned with the school - pupils, parents, governors and staff - are focused on the institution and not on its place in the local educational system" (Bush *et al*, 1993, p.209).

In contrast, Fitz *et al* (1993 p.114) list a number of broadly-defined moral questions about opting out; for example, "Is it proper for schools to make decisions on their futures without reference to their likely negative impact on neighbouring institutions?" They argue that their research suggested that some governors and parents, particularly those associated with voluntary schools, were concerned about these matters. Furthermore, by emphasising the need "to identify the values judged to be important in the provision of school services" (p.115), Fitz *et al* also highlight the issue of the value-base for self-governing schools.

Eric Bolton, former HM Senior Chief Inspector, also emphasised the inevitability of autonomous schools focusing on their own interests at the expense of the system as a whole in a speech he made to the Council of Local Education Authorities in 1992:

...it is at school level that most of the important decisions about priorities are made. No doubt many decisions will be sensible and intelligent. But they are self-interested decisions where the immediate concern is with what is of benefit to that particular institution... it is surely the triumph of hope over experience to expect that such self interested, isolated, fragmented decisions ... will add up to a sensible and efficient national school system ...¹

On the basis that the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) changed the balance in favour of the schools, the question is whether the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act reverses that shift and how significant is it in terms of the fundamental purpose of schools? Despite the fact that there was a tendency on the part of respondents to interpret the changes as 'going back', it is evident that, within the new framework, the role of the LEA is not the same as that prior to the 1988 ERA. The White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997, p.69) makes it clear that "the role of LEAs ... is no longer focused on control, but on supporting largely self-determining schools". In fact, a number of respondents indicated that the changes, or reductions, in responsibilities for GM school which opt for foundation or voluntary status are minor, albeit that there will need to be a loose relationship between the school and the LEA.

Turning to theories of educational management (Bush 1995) in search of a way to define such a loose relationship, aspects of an ambiguity model are indicated. Bush (1995,

p.113) suggests that ambiguity theorists characterise organisations by *fragmentation* and *loose coupling* (his emphasis). He argues that “institutions are divided into groups which have internal coherence based on common values and goals. Links between the groups are more tenuous and unpredictable” (p.113). He draws on the work of Weick (1976) who explains ‘loose coupling’ as follows:

coupled events are responsive, *but* ... each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness ... their attachment may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in its mutual effects, unimportant, and/or slow to respond ... Loose coupling also carries connotations of impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness all of which are potentially crucial properties of the ‘glue’ that holds organisations together (p. 3).

This model is applicable to the former GM sector because, as Orton and Weick (1990, p.216) explain, “loose coupling is the product of many years of effort by organisation theorists to combine the contradictory concepts of connection and autonomy”. Bush (1995) adds support by arguing “it is particularly appropriate for organizations whose members have a substantial degree of discretion ... The degree of integration required in education is markedly less than in many other settings, allowing fragmentation to develop and persist” (p.113). Hence, it could be argued that GM schools and their LEAs were ‘uncoupled’, whereas the intended relationship between foundation and voluntary schools and LEAs may be described as ‘loosely coupled’.

LOOKING FORWARD

So, what are the implications of ‘loose coupling’ for schools which until recently have been self-governing? Will the school be the prime institution or will it be overshadowed by the LEA?

From the Government’s perspective, it seems that the schools have everything to play for. During the past twelve months, ministers and other government representatives have been at pains to point out that LEAs will exert a ‘light touch’ unless there is cause for more. For example, in March 1998, the then School Standards Minister, Stephen Byers, was reported as commenting that local authorities have no God-given right to run education (Barnard, 1998). This was reinforced more recently by Education Minister, Charles Clarke, who was quoted as telling councillors at an Association of London Government conference that “it is not a question of you saying to GM schools: ‘Ha, you’re back now in the LEA fold’ or GM schools saying ‘Yahoo, you’ve had to adapt to our funding system, we were right all along’. He advised them to “do whatever you can to get the necessary partnership and agreement” (Dean, 1998, p.5).

It seems that the Government is determined to ensure that the issue of structure does not get in the way of their mission to raise educational standards. Although LEAs will have

responsibility for every school in their area, and no school will be without a local authority, the role of the LEA is tightly defined and “is not one of control ... An effective LEA will challenge schools to improve themselves, being ready to intervene where there are problems, but not to interfere with those schools that are doing well” (DfEE, 1997, p.27). A new partnership between schools and LEAs is emphasised with “clearly understand roles for school governors and for LEAs so they can contribute positively to raising standards” (DfEE, 1997, p.73). This notion of partnership has been further endorsed by the recent publication of a code of practice on LEA-school relations (DfEE, 1999).

However, the findings of this research are that there is still much concern within the schools about the stance the LEA representatives on their governing bodies will adopt and the extent to which foundation and voluntary schools will be self-governing. Although the loose coupling of schools and LEAs has provided New Labour with an alternative to GM status, there is no doubt that the connected/autonomous paradox as presented within the new framework is complex and problematic. Indeed, Grandori (1987) highlights this when he characterised loosely coupled systems as ones in which “everybody can do everything and in which the links between various parts do not necessarily have to follow given interdependence relationships but are virtually interchangeable and separate” (pp. 93-94).

Moreover, according to Orton and Weick (1990), members of organisations which fit Grandori’s description are “more likely to have thought deeply about interactions between couplings and decouplings”. They conclude that “to assert that a system is loosely coupled is to predicate specific properties and a specific history to the system, rather than an absence of properties” (p.219). In terms of the organisational changes in schools in England and Wales, it remains to be seen whether or not these statements are appropriate to the relationships between schools which were formerly GM and their LEAs and whether their properties and history are those that will make the system successful.

NOTE 1. An abridged version of Eric Bolton’s speech appeared in the Times Educational Supplement, July 1992.

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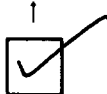
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